

Religious Communities and Political Participation among Chinese Migrants in Australia

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Certificate of authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Date: 12/04/2018

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Abstract

Religious institutions are a crucial link in the causal chain that connects citizens to the political process. This is because churches and other religious institutions have often been thought to supply churchgoers with the resources necessary to take part in the political arena, by providing either opportunities to develop civic skills or exposure to mobilisation attempts (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995).

Religious communities play an important role in facilitating immigrant political participation because immigrants tend to lack the resources and civic skills needed for political participation. Church involvement also connects immigrants to other organisations and individuals and the wider society and polity through the social capital embedded in the congregation, the civic skills fostered within the church and the opportunities provided for volunteering and civic involvement. The ethnic and religious identities formed enable immigrants and their families to integrate into the larger community (Foley & Hoge 2007).

This dissertation investigates the impact of membership of Christian religious communities on the political participation of Chinese migrants in Australia and compares this with the impact of active membership of voluntary secular associations. Using a mixed methods approach involving analysis of existing survey data, development of an original online survey and in-depth interviews, this research explores various aspects of religious communities and secular associations. The interviews with churchgoers allow the investigation of small group and church-based activities, providing data that goes beyond more traditional measures of denominational affiliation and church attendance. This

enables the study to examine the effects of skill-building opportunities and small group involvement on political participation. The interviews with members of secular associations allow the study to examine the range of formal and informal activities and interactions members take part in and their impact on political participation.

The study finds that, for Chinese migrants, membership of a religious community has a very limited impact on some forms of political participation. Political involvement is primarily restricted to expressing concerns on issues perceived as opposed to their religious faith. In stark contrast to religious communities, members of Chinese voluntary organisations are more active in Australian politics. This result lends some support to previous findings which emphasise the important role of ethnic voluntary organisations in immigrant political participation. This dissertation represents an important contribution to a literature that has largely ignored the role of religious communities and voluntary organisations in the political participation of Asian immigrants, particularly Chinese migrants. ■